

Japanese Americans in Terre Haute before World War II

In Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine* the reader catches a glimpse into the life of Japanese Americans before and after World War II, specifically focused on the effects the war had on this immigrant community. While faced with discrimination throughout the United States, many Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were transferred to concentration camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This relocation was due to a higher concentration of Japanese Americans in that region and the fear that these citizens would turn on their fellow countrymen. Early in the book, Otsuka highlights the fear and panic directed at Japanese American populations with descriptions of the atmosphere during the days following Pearl Harbor.

The story of one Terre Haute family, the Nakamuras, displays the levels of success some Japanese Americans enjoyed prior to World War II. Research indicates that Hiroshi Nakamura came to the United States during the early 1900s. According to the 1910 census, he worked in the household of Max Blumberg, a well-known banker and father of future Terre Haute attorney Benjamin Blumberg. Nakamura later decided to follow his calling for photography and about the start of the First World War he went into business with George Graham Holloway, a regionally celebrated photographer in his own right. Over his career, Nakamura became known for producing "remarkable pictures of children at their homes" while Holloway went on to be noted for his striking portraits of men. Nakamura's success as a photographer and businessman prior to World War II juxtaposes the image of prosperous Japanese Americans with the post-war realities that saw these populations salvaging what they could of their lives after being uprooted so suddenly.

Nakamura later became associated with the Martin Photo Shop in Terre Haute; even naming his first daughter Lilly Martina. A second daughter, Dorothy, was born to the family in 1922. The Nakamuras were endeared in the Terre Haute community and Mr. Nakamura renowned for his knowledge of Japanese art and culture. Hiroshi and his wife Mitsuko, however, longed to return to Japan with their two daughters, successfully accomplishing this move in 1932. Hiroshi Nakamura and his wife never returned to the United States, and their daughter Dorothy passed while living in Japan during the late 1930s.

Of the Nakamura family, only Lilly Nakamura would return to the United States. She traveled to San Francisco, California in early June, 1941, six months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. San Francisco was home to the Kako family, close relations to Lilly, who would be gathered and sent to Heart Mountain, an internment camp in Wyoming. Terre Haute-born Lilly avoided the camps, but over 1,000 Japanese Americans sharing her last name, Nakamura, were interred in these domestic concentration camps.

By 1948, Lilly had relocated to the east coast where she married an American named Reid Allen, eventually settling in Wisconsin. While likely happy to be in America, the knowledge that members of her extended family were being interred here must have been heartbreaking. *When*

the Emperor was Divine strives to emphasize the impact of the internment camps, showing how far-reaching these incarcerations were in their ability to divide families and communities.

Further, it works to put a face to those affected by these tragic events, even if it is only in a general sense. Otsuka achieves this goal by limiting her main characters to generalized categories: the woman, child, father, and mother. These faceless speakers stand-in for the larger community, making connections to the reader through lived experience, not ancestry or any other avenue. This technique helps readers to empathize with those in the book, similar to the empathy Lilly Nakamura must have felt for her community in the United States as she walked free and so many others were imprisoned.